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GOD IN THE HANDS  
OF MAN

By  
THEODORE E. JOHNSON

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## GOD IN THE HANDS OF MAN

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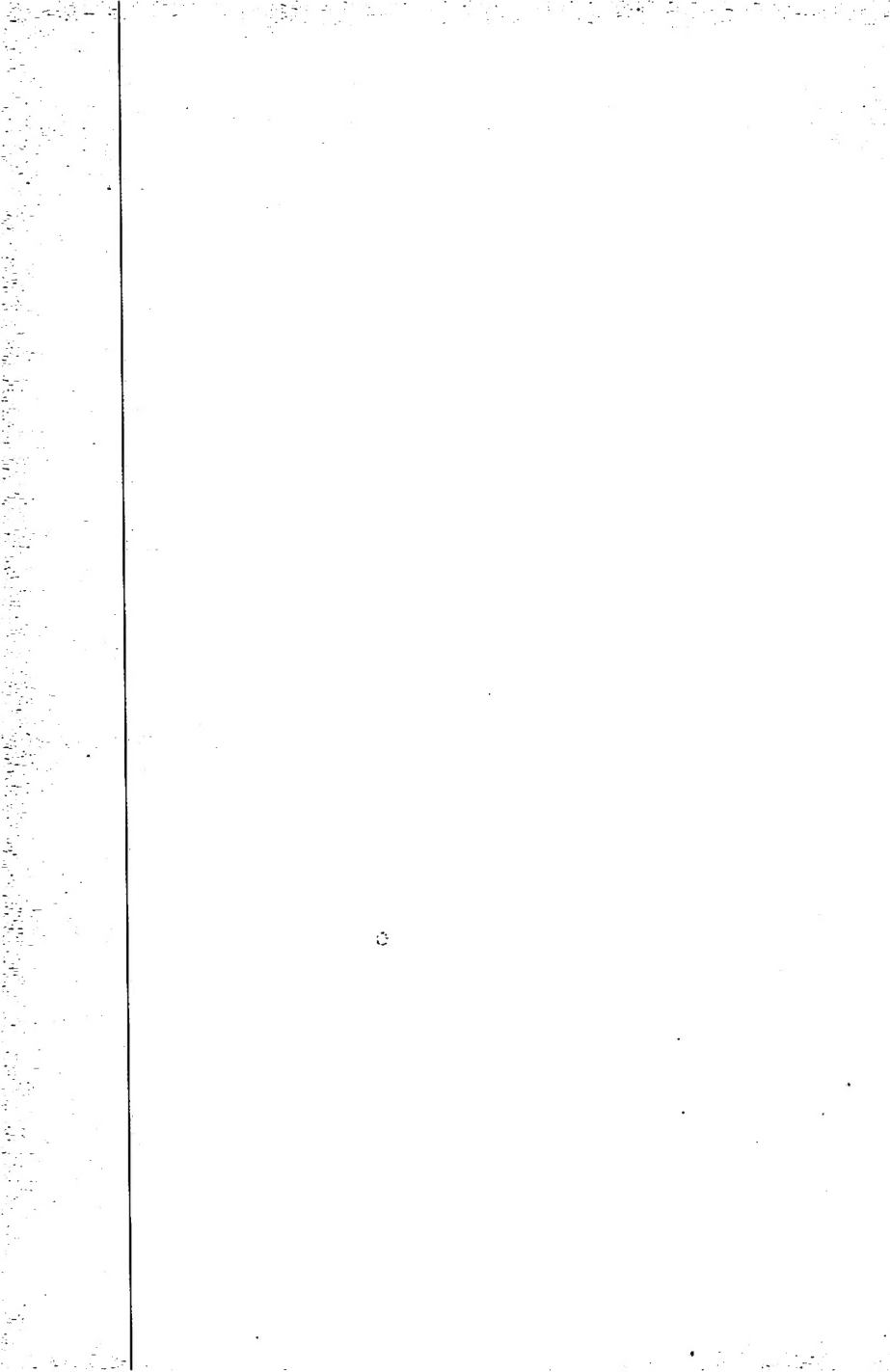
MY WIFE ELAINE

also

To

OUR CHILDREN

JUDITH AND THEODORE, JR.



## THE PREFACE

An idea that has made a profound impression upon a person is not readily forgotten. It is revived from time to time as related experiences occur. This is the case with the theme followed in this volume of Lenten messages.

Obviously, the idea of "the great God in the hands of little man" cannot be confined solely to any one season of the Christian Year; rather, it is the message of the holy Scriptures from Genesis to Revelation, from Mount Sinai to Mount Calvary, and beyond. And yet, its usage during Lent is particularly appropriate when one considers that this is the season when man beholds the unfolding historical drama of the human treatment of the Son of God.

This theme suggests that in the last and deepest act of the drama, in which the great God yields himself up into the hands of little man, there is a unique demonstration of the Divine permitting sinful man to "handle" His sacred person. It is this theme played over and over again, like an old refrain, and described against the backdrop of the passion of Christ, by which we attempt to bring into sharp focus the reconciliation of man to God through Jesus Christ.

It is our purpose to state this theme by using *symbols*—men who were involved personally in the historical sequence of events during the final week before Christ's crucifixion. These men are symbolic of men in every age who have Christ "on their

hands" and who must decide in what manner or way they shall "handle" Him. The question of Pontius Pilate, "Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?"<sup>1</sup> is the perennial query addressed to every man of every age without exception.

T. E. J.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 27:22

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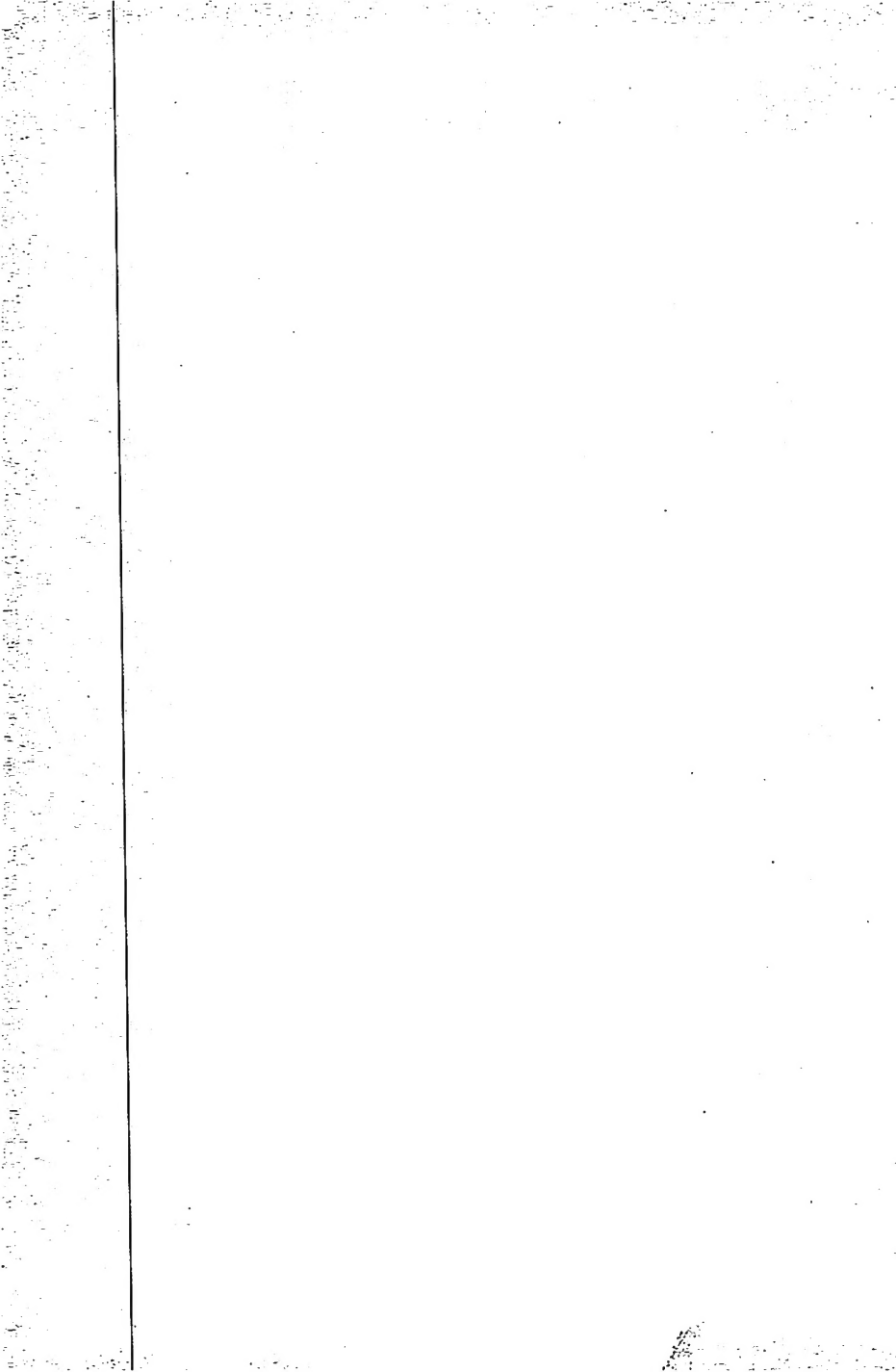
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T. E. J.





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For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. John 3:16-17

. . . Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Philippians 2:5b-11

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## CHAPTER ONE

# THE GREAT GOD IN THE HANDS OF LITTLE MAN

(Meditation for Ash Wednesday Holy Communion)

ONE OF THE MOST STRIKING THINGS about God in history is the way in which evil causes begin suddenly to crumble just when to the view of man they seem to be at the very zenith of power and strength.

Nowhere is this truth better illustrated than at Golgotha where sinful man appeared to have gained the complete mastery over Jesus Christ by putting Him to death and thereby presuming His cause to be lost forever. But while man rejoiced in his supposed triumph, his evil kingdom was shaken, and the victory of Christ over death and the power of evil goes on in the lives of His followers.

This is the message of the Lenten and Easter seasons. We are afforded another opportunity to witness the historical struggle between the Holy God and sinful man. This conflict reached its climax with the Incarnation of the Son of God—the immortal God clothing himself in human form and thus identifying him-

self completely with mortal man. The passion of our Lord between the hours of the Last Supper and the death of Christ is the dramatic account of this identification.

From a purely human point of view it would appear that the Son of God permits man to frustrate completely His avowed purpose of redeeming man when He allows himself to be taken hold of and bound by His own creatures—weak and sinful man. Jesus bound! How extraordinary! How astounding! Man, it would seem, has the false notion that God has been vanquished. Is it any wonder then, that, with the ugly crucifixion on Calvary's hill man seems to have won the victory. But Christ, the mighty God in human flesh, breaks the bonds and chains which forged his death, namely, man's sin and transgression of the divine law. Christ demonstrates through a magnificent display of power the true character of His divine nature. Christ permits himself to be handled by man in this most humiliating fashion in order that He might fully identify himself with man and embrace man in His great love. This lowly abasement makes it possible for God to lift His creatures up out of the mire of sin and shame and receive them as sons and heirs of His eternal kingdom.

Man cannot manipulate God and conform Him to human patterns of thought and conduct. The creature cannot gain mastery over the Creator. It is God, rather, who invades man's world of thought and action and who permits mortal man to take hold of Him by the instrumentality of His eternal Son, Jesus Christ. Christ becomes the only point at which God and man can meet. The Apostle Paul states this concept masterfully when he writes:

... Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on

a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.<sup>1</sup>

Here is stated the central tenet of the Christian faith—God was in Christ revealing His love for man, seeking and providing man's reconciliation with Him.

As you and I begin our annual pilgrimage to Calvary once again, it is altogether fitting that we pause to contemplate the mystery of God's ineffable love, the love which spans the gulf between the Creator and the creature. Charles Duthie, a Scottish educator, theologian, and evangelist, comments upon God's all-extensive and all-embracing love as follows: "He is the God who involves himself in our human plight because He cares so deeply for us. The Cross is the measure of His care. His love reaches to the deepest places of human sinning and beyond."<sup>2</sup> Man's response to this great act of caring and loving is conditioned by his participation in the suffering and death of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let us look at the cross which is the symbol of God's great love for man, and yet, at the same time, the symbol of man's rejection of that great love. Beneath the cross are two kinds of people. The difference between them is determined by the way in which they respond to the message of the Cross. A few of them, very few, are weeping tears of bitter sorrow. Among them is a penitent thief who begs for mercy, and finds it. He represents man who, in spite of his sin and shame, reaches out and takes hold of the Savior and finds salvation. But there are others among the peoples beneath the cross. There are others merely watching, perhaps curious, perhaps hostile, perhaps indifferent. One of them is a thief, going to his death defiantly, without any sign of repentance, although he does appear to be suffering a

measure of remorse. He represents many others. He serves as a symbol of man who scandalously and shamefully handles the Son of God to his own condemnation. This line of division runs through the whole human race.

This ageless relationship between God and man is nowhere better illustrated and applied today than in the Lord's Supper. It is in this Holy Communion that God comes as close to man as it is possible for Him to do. He offers himself—His Presence—under the forms of the bread and wine. The Rev. Berthold von Schenk in his excellent book, *The Presence*, an unusual volume of communion messages, brings this idea into sharp focus. He writes: "It is an unseen Presence, and yet in this unseen Presence there is no mere memorial, but the Birth, Life, Death, Resurrection, and Ascension brought down to today, space and time abolished . . . It is the same Body which was born of the Blessed Virgin and hung on the Cross, not as it was then in the state of humiliation, but now risen and victorious."<sup>3</sup> The Holy Communion, then, can become one of the most sacred moments in man's religious experience, for here it is that God permits and invites man to "handle" His Son. It is the sacred and blessed handling of His Son which brings to man the forgiveness of his sin, life, and salvation.

God desires to communicate himself to man. In His love He has instituted the Holy Communion where man can discover the true bond of His love and the power of His reconciliation. The Apostle Paul, in writing to the Corinthians, states, "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?"<sup>4</sup> Here man meets, and is joined with, the living God. Here, man can take hold of the divine gift of love.

May none of us be guilty of handling this gift of love carelessly or indifferently and so eat and drink "the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner,"<sup>5</sup> to our own condemnation. Let us not reject the pardon so freely offered or be charged with the

great and shameful sins that marked man's walk along the Calvary road so many centuries ago.

Rather, as we draw near to God in the Sacrament of the Altar, let us handle this gift of love with holy and reverent hands and let us in faith receive the forgiveness of our sins even as God has promised.<sup>6</sup> Let us submit ourselves to God, the Savior, whose mighty arms are lovingly outstretched in invitation to all men. And let us listen to the reassuring words which fall from the gracious lips of the Savior, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest."<sup>7</sup>

Wide open are thy hands,  
Paying with more than gold  
The awful debt of guilty men,  
Forever and of old.  
Ah, let me grasp those hands,  
That we may never part,  
And let the power of their blood  
Sustain my fainting heart.

Wide open are thine arms,  
A fallen world to embrace;  
To take to love and endless rest  
Our whole forsaken race.  
Lord, I am sad and poor,  
But boundless is thy grace;  
Give me the soul-transforming joy  
For which I seek thy face.

Draw all my mind and heart  
Up to thy throne on high,  
And let thy sacred Cross exalt  
My spirit to the sky.

To these, thy mighty hands,  
My spirit I resign;  
Living, I live alone to thee,  
Dying, alone am thine.

Ascribed to ST. BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX  
Tr. Charles Porterfield Krauth

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<sup>1</sup> Philipplians 2: 5b-11

<sup>2</sup> Charles S. Duthie, *God In His World*, Abingdon Press, New York and Nashville, p. 20. Used by permission.

<sup>3</sup> Rev. B. von Schenk, *The Presence*, Ernst Kaufmann, Inc., New York and Chicago, 1945, p. 12. Used by permission of author-owner.

<sup>4</sup> 1 Corinthians 10:16

<sup>5</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:27

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 26:28

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 11:28



There is grace enough for thousands  
Of new worlds as great as this;  
There is room for fresh creations  
In that upper home of bliss.

For the love of God is broader  
Than the measures of man's mind,  
And the heart of the Eternal  
Is most wonderfully kind.

FREDERICK WILLIAM FABER.

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Then they came up and laid hands on Jesus and seized him . . . . Then those who had seized Jesus led him to Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and the elders had gathered . . . . Then the high priest tore his robes, and said, "He has uttered blasphemy. Why do we still need witnesses? You have now heard his blasphemy. What is your judgment?" They answered, "He deserves death." Matthew 26:50, 57, 65-66

But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him [Pilate] release for them Barabbas instead. Mark 15:11

It was Caiaphas who had given counsel to the Jews that it was expedient that one man should die for the people. John 18:14

Pilate said to them, "Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" They all said, "Let him be crucified." . . . And all the people answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!" Then he released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, delivered him to be crucified. Matthew 27:22, 25-26

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## CHAPTER TWO

# IN THE HANDS OF RELIGIOUS MAN—CAIAPHAS

(Meditation for First Week in Lent)

STRANGELY ENOUGH, it was religious man that was responsible for the death of the Son of God. It was religious leadership that incited the people to handle the Christ so shamefully and outrageously. It was the prevailing religious attitude of the day that brought the promised Messiah to an ignominious death, the death of a criminal and outcast. It was religious man that accepted willingly the full responsibility for the crucifixion of Jesus.

What irony! Man who professed devotion to the Almighty and who vowed obedience to his Creator stands condemned by his own handling of God. It is a matter of sad historic record that men who were the priests in clerical robes, the depository of divine oracles, the pundits of ecclesiastical law, the heirs of Old Testament revelation, the ministers at the altar of divine sacrifice—these men conceived the plot that Jesus, at all costs, must be done away with.

The almighty God comes to sinful man to save him, and His own servant "kills" the very means which God uses to accomplish that end.

This is the part of the passion of Christ which we church people are always tempted to pass over without much notice. We are quick to expose all others who had a hand in the crucifixion of Jesus. We can dwell at length on their great and shameful sins. But we don't like to face the fact that the worst offender in that most horrible of all crimes was none other than the church of the day. We recoil from admitting that the idea of crucifying Christ was conceived in the minds of religious leaders. We are ashamed to confess that Jesus Christ was crucified in the name of religion. But such is the truth.

Caiaphas, the high priest of Israel and the chief justice of the supreme court of Jewry, the Sanhedrin, becomes the symbol of religious man everywhere who has Christ on his hands and who attempts to get rid of Him by religious scorn and ridicule. Caiaphas is the symbol of religious man who will not allow the truth of God to stand supreme, whose indignation is aroused at even the thought that some aspect of his prevailing religious life may not be in accord with the Holy Scriptures. Caiaphas is the symbol of religious man who resorts to lies and treachery in order to preserve a system of thought or a way of life which is most profitable and gratifying to him. Further, Caiaphas is the symbol of religious man who is constantly trying to humanize the Christ, to naturalize the Bible, to become a political force in the world, to usurp the rights of the state, to aspire to religious monopoly in the effort to become a recognized influence.

Here, in the story of Jesus' trial, crucifixion, and resurrection, there is a very important lesson and a stern warning for all who are leaders, or teachers, or ministers of religion. And it is a matter of great concern for everyone else too, for people in general are either under religious leadership or influenced by it. In the intensely dramatic scenes before us, we learn something about the church of that day, in the light of which we do well to examine our own churches today.

First, consider the attitude of the religious leaders toward the crucifixion of our Lord, which determined their attitude toward

His resurrection. When you stand in Pilate's courtroom and hear him ask in utter despair and confusion: "What shall I do then with Jesus who is called Christ?" you know that it is the cry of a pagan soul who actually does not know what to do with the Son of God. And the answer he got to his question was: "Let him be crucified!" Who said that? Who dictated the course of action for the Roman governor? Was it one of his political advisors who was anxious to be done with the case? No. Was it some wild fanatic shouting alone out of the throng? No. Was it a crude soldier expressing his scorn for this idealistic Teacher? No, none of these, nor anyone like them. The chief priests and the elders, under the leadership of the high priest Caiaphas, dictated the decision which Pilate was to make! He might have expected a better answer from them.

We are told by the inspired writer that the religious leaders "persuaded the people."<sup>1</sup> That is to say, there was a difference of opinion not only between the priests and Pilate, but at first very likely also between the priests and the mob which they had organized. That means they used argumentation and persuasion. They did not shrink from using it with great determination and prodigious effort to get their idea across. The plot was born in the bosom of religious leaders, not in the pagan mind of Pontius Pilate.

If you still think there must be some way to exonerate these men from the horrible stigma of this deed, then read the record. "So when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying 'I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves.'"<sup>2</sup> Notice, that this representative of the pagan world tried to dissuade the clerics from their wicked determination. But nothing could stop these men. They didn't even refuse to accept the responsibility for this evil deed. They cried out: "His blood be on us and on our children."<sup>3</sup>

So there isn't any doubt about it. Organized religion accepted willingly the full responsibility for the crucifixion of Jesus. The

religious leaders had laid their plans, they had organized a handful of supporters, and in the name of religion they exercised power over the people and the Roman governor to crucify the Christ.

Now with that in mind, consider the attitude of the religious leaders toward the resurrection of the Lord. Pilate had been told that Jesus claimed He had power over death and that He predicted He would arise from the grave on the third day. So it was suggested that he assign a guard of soldiers to watch the tomb, lest the disciples of Jesus come and steal His body, and then claim that their Master had made good His boast. But who told Pilate all of that? The same religious leaders under the cunning influence of Caiaphas. They were not satisfied with the Crucifixion. They wanted to be done with Jesus, and so they couldn't take any chances. They didn't believe that He could actually come out of the tomb, but they wanted to make sure that even a false rumor of His resurrection would not get started. They were determined to destroy Him and to discredit His claims, to make it impossible for His influence to continue.

Pilate consented to their request. The tomb was sealed, and a military guard stood watch over it. But on Sunday morning there was a great earthquake, and an angel descended from heaven to roll away the stone, and Christ came out of the tomb, as He had predicted! Trembling with fear the soldiers fled to the city and reported what had happened. But they didn't get very far with their story. The church leaders were there to meet them, and they had a solution for this problem, too. Just as they had bribed Judas to betray His Master, so now they bribed the soldiers to tell a lie about the Resurrection. They told them to say that the disciples had stolen the body during the night, so that there could be no valid claim that Christ had actually conquered death.

That lie was very popular. People believed it. They still do. It was nonsense, of course, for it refutes itself. But it was effective. And the genius behind it was the church of that day! Re-

ligion itself was the first to deny the Resurrection! Ministers of God told the world not to believe in it! The opposition to Easter did not begin with atheists and scoffers and infidels. It began with theologians and elders and priests.

We see here religion at its very worst in the crucifixion and the resurrection of Christ. It seems almost incredible that they could hate Him so much and that they would go to such extremes in their determination to prevent Him from being recognized as the Savior of the world. But these are the facts.

What did they have against Him? Surely, one could expect that religion would have a better treatment for the Christ. Why did they oppose Him? Well, He taught the people that He was the Son of God, the promised Messiah, and that He came upon this earth to give His life for sinners. He called himself the great shepherd, who gives His life for the sheep. And in this teaching He said plainly that He was the fulfillment of all the promises in the Old Testament. He demanded that men accept Him in faith, trust in Him for salvation from their sins, and depend upon Him to see that they would enter heaven and enjoy everlasting life. He said they could never be saved by any works of their own, no matter how close they might come to obeying the law. He insisted that salvation was a gift of God, not an accomplishment of man; and that those who received the gift must give expression of it in this life by loving God above all, and their neighbors as themselves.

Then, Jesus proved repeatedly that He was God by doing great miracles, even raising men from the dead. The people followed Him in large numbers and hung on His words. So the leaders got together and decided that drastic action was necessary. They agreed that Jesus must die. Now all they needed was an opportunity. And so that night when Judas betrayed Him, they held a secret session of the court. They did not dare to do it in public, for the common people heard Jesus gladly. Religion feared public opinion, and so they secretly organized, instructed, and drilled their cohorts, under cover of darkness, to do their

bidding. But all their methods of accusation and false witness failed to give them a case against Him; and so the high priest Caiaphas, chief of them all, put one question to Jesus, on which everything depended. Bluntly he asked Him under oath: "I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." And Jesus affirmed His deity; He replied: "You have said so. But I tell you, hereafter you will see the Son of man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven."<sup>4</sup>

That should have been enough to open their eyes. He had told them the whole story of the Resurrection, the Ascension, and Judgment Day—in advance! They should have fallen on their knees before the Son of God. But instead the high priest Caiaphas said to his colleagues: "He has uttered blasphemy . . . . You have now heard his blasphemy. What is your judgment?" And they all responded in unison: "He deserves death."<sup>5</sup> Then they spit in His face, and struck Him, and slapped Him.

Their decision against Him was against His deity, His divine saviorhood, His doctrine that men must be saved by Him. The church, mind you, voted against Him because it did not believe Him when He said He was the Savior of the church!

Now, of course, we who are religious leaders today are exceedingly quick to disavow any relationship with Caiaphas and the religious leaders of that day. And we assert that things are different today. We even go further and call ourselves the "Christian church." But the question that persists nevertheless is: What kind of answer does the church give today when the confused pagan world, like Pilate of old, asks: "What shall we do with Jesus who is called Christ?"<sup>6</sup> Before we can be sure that we are not giving instruction to expel Him out of the church, we shall have to examine ourselves and see what our answer really is.

One hears from many quarters today that there is a great need in the church for the historic Christian gospel. Ministers and laymen alike are alarmed about conditions in their churches, and



they feel it is past high time for a radical reformation—a return to the evangelical faith of their fathers. Everywhere you go today you hear voices of criticism within the church. It is condemned for its attitude of thought and action which attempts to center Christ's teaching around the inherent goodness of man and the subsequent preaching of a doctrine of good works. There is the grave danger that the Bible is explained and interpreted as man's gradual discovery of God rather than God's progressive revelation to man. In some sections, the church is endeavoring to usurp the rights of the state and become a political rather than a spiritual force in the world. The gospel has undergone many shades of toning down. Religious leaders may not speak of sin, or call men sinners. They must not tell man what God thinks of them, but they must talk of the "inherent goodness within man." The minister is expected to antagonize no one, but to win the applause of everyone, even if that antagonizes God. Christ called sin by its right name, openly censured the hypocrites, and even drove them out of the Temple. Perhaps it is true that we are only adjusting ourselves to a man-centered culture. That requires a man-made Christ, not the Christ who is the Son of God, and who came to give salvation by His conquest of death and the grave.

There are more ways than one in which the church may become guilty of expelling the Christ—the real Christ. They tell us that the old Russian church under the czars became so corrupt that she must be given a large part of the blame for the revolution which paved the way for atheistic Communism. And it is a matter of open records that humanism in Germany entered the church to replace the supernatural, saving Christ, and that this humanistic church was a contributing factor in paving the way for Nazism with its consequent destruction. There are many indications in history that a church which has forsaken the real Christ can lead whole civilizations astray.

We in the church today are called upon to answer Pilate's question about Christ. And we must answer it in terms of Good

Friday and Easter. If we are not giving the right answer to that question, then let us get back to the Christ of historic Christianity, who claimed He was God in the flesh, come to die for sinners, to earn for them eternal life; in short, to save them, because they cannot save themselves. If we were called upon to stand in Pilate's courtroom, or to explain the empty tomb, on whose side would we be? Would our doctrine within the church today correspond with that of Caiaphas and the chief priests, or with that of Christ? Indeed, we are called upon like Caiaphas, the rulers, the chief priests, and the crowd to handle the case for our own souls and for the church to which we profess allegiance. What will we do with Jesus who is called the crucified and risen Christ?

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 27:20

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 27:24

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 27:25

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 26:63, 64

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 26:65, 66

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 27:22

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?  
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?  
O, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble,  
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?  
Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?  
O, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble,  
Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?

*Negro Spiritual*

---

Now Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus said to him, "You have said so." But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he made no answer. Then Pilate said to him, "Do you not hear how many things they testify against you?" But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge; so that the governor wondered greatly. Matthew 27:11-14

Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth hears my voice." Pilate said to him, "What is truth?" John 18:37, 38

Upon this Pilate sought to release him, but the Jews cried out, "If you release this man, you are not Caesar's friend; every one who makes himself a king sets himself against Caesar." John 19:12

Pilate said to them, "Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" They all said, "Let him be crucified." And he said, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified." So when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves." Matthew 27:22-24

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## CHAPTER THREE

# IN THE HANDS OF SECULAR MAN—PONTIUS PILATE

(Meditation for Second Week in Lent)

THE WORLD in which we are living today is the direct descendant of Pilate's world, especially in its attitude toward the Son of God. Large areas of our culture will have absolutely nothing to do with Him. Millions of men and women have washed their hands of Him. They do not accept Him. And they do not reject Him. They simply dodge Him completely. The modern name for that attitude of indifference is secularism.

Pontius Pilate becomes the symbol of this attitude toward the Truth of God. The Roman governor becomes the symbol of man today who has Christ "on his hands" and doesn't know how to dispose of Him. Pilate becomes the symbol of man who isn't really *for* Christ, nor really *against* Him, but who just doesn't want anything to do with Him. Pilate is the symbol of man who is neither hater nor believer—man who listens to Christ's wonderful words, who benefits by His amazing miracles, who marvels at His great wisdom, and who talks about His marvelous teachings, but who, in the last analysis, will have nothing to do with Him. Pilate becomes the symbol of modern man who wants to avoid the crisis of decision, refusing to be either for or against Christ Jesus.

Pilate was one of the most important men in the history of the world—important, that is, in the sense of notoriety. For he officially represented the government of that world in that day when he sent Jesus Christ to the cross. It's a strange thought to us who are Christians that our Savior, though innocent, had to be condemned by a temporal judge and thereby free us from the judgment of God to which we were subject. And the more so because the voice of a Roman governor was the voice of a world empire. His court handed down the most important decision of all time. There is a profound significance in that little phrase of the Apostles' Creed: "Suffered under Pontius Pilate." It points an accusing finger, not merely at one man, but at one world! Pilate's decision was Rome's decision, and therefore the world's decision. Willingly or not, all of Rome's subjects were represented in that verdict.

However, the significance of that trial may not be confined to the period of time in which it happened. It was more than a great historical event. It was an expression of an attitude toward Christ and a judgment of Him which can be found in every generation. The fact that the modern world, for example, is repeating Pilate's mistake and adopting his judgment of Christ is not merely a matter of coincidence or parallel. It is rather a revelation of the same sinful reasoning of which Pilate was guilty and which is so common among men of all ages in their reaction to God's only begotten Son. In a sense you may say that this world is like an immense courtroom, where the Son of the Almighty God is on trial and where the world is re-enacting the same drama in every period of history.

Pilate is the supreme example of a world that has Jesus Christ on its hands and doesn't know how to get rid of Him. The enemies of Jesus had brought Him to the Roman governor demanding the death penalty. At first, Pilate thought he was dealing with just another criminal, and the accusations apparently confirmed his opinion. But when he began to question the

prisoner, he became aware of His extraordinary character. He marveled at Jesus' silence in the face of all accusations. And so he took Him aside and had a private interview with Him. They talked of profound things—about the spiritual kingdom of Christ, and even about the problem of absolute truth, which led Pilate to ask his famous question of despair: "What is truth?"

But what troubled him most of all was that Jesus declared himself to be the Son of God. We are told that he became "the more afraid."<sup>1</sup> He began to tremble in the presence of Christ. He was convinced of His innocence and said so publicly, and he tried desperately again and again to set Him free. But he knew that if he refused the demands of the people, there would be an uprising, and that would be disastrous for his political fortunes. Caesar would not look favorably upon a governor who couldn't keep the captives in captivity without rebellion. Somehow he must try to satisfy both his conscience and his constituency, and that seemed like an impossible combination at the moment.

He tried to escape the dilemma by offering a substitute prisoner, Barabbas by name, who was guilty of murder. That was supposed to be a political master stroke, even though he knew it was exceedingly poor jurisprudence. But it failed. In fact, it backfired in his face, for the people and their leaders wanted to kill Jesus, not Barabbas. And Pilate, caught in his own trap, finally cried out in desperation: "Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" Ah! that was the crux of the matter, the real problem in his soul! And since he was asking the mob for advice, he got it quickly. They shouted back: "Crucify Him!" "Crucify Him!" But he didn't want to do that! He only wanted to get rid of him, to get Him off his hands!

He was trying to follow the advice that had come from his wife a few hours earlier. She had told him of her distressing dreams about Jesus and had warned him: "Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much over him today in a dream."<sup>2</sup> That made him more fearful than ever; but her advice was excellent, he thought. Yes! that was it! He must

have nothing to do with Jesus! That would be his philosophy of justice in this case.

But so far it had failed him. Like a man sinking in quicksand, he was getting in deeper with every attempt to escape. And yet he would try once more, even now, when he knew he was being forced to grant the wicked desire of that uncontrollable mob and its vicious leaders. Though frustrated in his purpose, he insisted on it to the very end. And so, we are told: "When Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves." It may have looked foolish to those who saw him do it, but it was a fitting symbol of the philosophy which he had adopted in dealing with Jesus. He washed his hands of Him! He didn't want to condemn Him. Nor did he want to acquit Him. He wasn't really *for* Him, nor was he really *against* Him. He wanted to have nothing to do with Him. With that determination he delivered Him into their hands to be crucified.

You might say that Pilate was fairly representative of the age in which he lived. He largely epitomized the prevailing attitude toward Christ and put the official stamp of world government upon it. So many people had done the same thing with Jesus. True, there were some, just a handful, who loved Him and followed Him. And there were others, also a minority, like the religious leaders of that day, who bitterly hated Him and conspired to kill Him. But the vast majority of the people who came in contact with Christ were neither haters nor believers. They were completely indifferent to Him.

This attitude today is what we call secular or profane. This does not mean that individuals or society as a whole take God's name in vain, but rather that we have no "holy place" in our lives. It means that our lives are lived outside of the influence of God's presence—ignoring the fact that "in him we live and move and have our being."<sup>3</sup> Our lives have no high walls of conviction about them.



Consider the greatest fields of human endeavor today: business, industry, agriculture, science, education, politics, music and art. These have taken no definite decision for Christ. Nor have they declared themselves to be openly against Him. They just have nothing to do with Him. They are called secular, and many people insist that in all of these things we must maintain a strict neutrality over against all religion. Imagine, a world in which the biggest enterprises of man have no room in them for the Son of God! They can afford to ignore Him altogether, to be totally oblivious of His presence!

Isn't that essentially a pagan culture? Is it any different from the paganism of Rome in which Pilate was a politician? Oh, but you say, that's not being fair to our western civilization. We don't stand in the way of Christianity. In fact, we believe in religious liberty, and we will even fight for it. But what do we mean by religious liberty? Which means more to our world when it thinks of religious liberty: the liberty to believe in Jesus Christ, or the liberty not to believe in Him? For the great majority of our people I suspect it is the latter.

And that was precisely the sin of Pilate and his world. He would have enjoyed great popularity today. Christ is tolerated among us. Christianity is given its little corner somewhere to work out its ideas and practice its ritual unmolested and in seclusion. But it does not permeate the culture of our day, much less does it occupy a place of commanding influence. It is expected to be a follower, not a leader of men. Men talk piously about religious liberty, and they feel very magnanimous and benevolent when they preserve for Christianity a pigeonhole in the social structure. Oh no, Christ must not be persecuted, nor condemned, nor crucified! And let us be good enough to exempt His church from taxation! And let it enjoy certain concessions and privileges! And let's inscribe our coins with a pious motto, and open our legislatures with prayer, and put our hands on a Bible when we take oath of office! Let's not be antago-

nistic to Christianity, but friendly, and tolerant, and even protective. We don't want to be like the Russians, do we?

Sometimes, I think it would be much easier to bear the outright persecution and torture of those who hate Christianity than to suffer this complacent and sophisticated toleration of a secular world toward the Christian faith.

G. A. Studdert-Kennedy points up this truth in his classic poem "Indifference."<sup>4</sup>

When Jesus came to Golgotha they hanged Him on a tree,  
They drove great nails through hands and feet, and made a  
Calvary;  
They crowned Him with a crown of thorns, red were His wounds  
and deep,  
For those were crude and cruel days, and human flesh was cheap.  
When Jesus came to Birmingham, they simply passed Him by.  
They never hurt a hair of Him, they only let Him die;  
For men had grown more tender, and they would not give Him  
pain,  
They only just passed down the street, and left Him in the rain.  
Still Jesus cried, "Forgive them, for they know not what they do,"  
And still it rained the winter rain that drenched Him through  
and through;  
The crowds went home and left the streets without a soul to see,  
And Jesus crouched against a wall and cried for Calvary.

Do you really believe it when you are told that Christ has a claim on this world in all of its operations? Perhaps you might agree to a large extent. But your business, or your few acres of farm land, or your devious politics, or your reputable profession, or your private home, or your daily labor, or whatever it may be—do these have no need of Christ? Do you say: "Well, Christianity may be useful to other people, but I have progressed to a point where I can live and die graciously without it? Or at least I think so." Maybe you tell your minister to go right on and preach the gospel anyway, not to bother about you; cer-

tainly Christianity shouldn't be extinguished; it can't do the world any harm.

If this constitutes your attitudes toward Jesus Christ and His church, then you are a follower of Pontius Pilate.

The experience of Jesus Christ in that Roman court was more painful to Him than the torture and abuse which He endured at the hands of His enemies. Notably the Apostles' Creed says: "Suffered under Pontius Pilate," not under Herod, or Caiaphas, or the soldiers who mocked Him, or the chief priests who buffeted Him and spit upon Him, or the Roman centurion and his executioners who nailed Him to the cross, or the mob that railed on Him and blasphemed Him! To be sure, the crucifixion and all the rest of the torture was horrible. But was there anything more difficult to bear and more insulting to the Son of God than to have the government of the world wash its hands of Him? Do you still want to be in Pilate's class?

A secular philosophy of life just doesn't work. Remember what Jesus said: "He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters."<sup>5</sup> That means that after all there are only two alternatives. A third one is impossible. Pontius Pilate has gone down in history, not as one who successfully dodged the Son of God, but rather as one who actually had very much to do with Him. We are still saying it every Sunday in our churches: "Suffered under Pontius Pilate."

In that final day of reckoning, when we are gathered in the judgment hall of God, there will be only two kinds of people, not three: the saved and the lost, or the children of heaven and the children of hell, or the sheep and the goats.

We are called upon, like Pilate, to handle the case for our own souls and for this profane world in which we dwell. What will we do with Jesus who is called the crucified and risen Christ?

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<sup>1</sup> John 19:8

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 27:19

<sup>3</sup> Acts 17:28

<sup>4</sup> *The Sorrows of God* by G. A. Studdert-Kennedy, Copyright by Harper & Brothers, New York and London, 1924. Used by permission.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 12:30

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When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. And when he learned that he belonged to Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him over to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time. When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had long desired to see him, because he had heard about him, and he was hoping to see some sign done by him. So he questioned him at some length; but he made no answer. The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him. And Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him; then, arraying him in gorgeous apparel, he sent him back to Pilate. And Herod and Pilate became friends with each other that very day, for before this they had been at enmity with each other. Luke 23:6-12

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## CHAPTER FOUR

# IN THE HANDS OF CYNICAL MAN—HEROD ANTIPAS

(Meditation for Third Week in Lent)

SENSATIONALISM, RATIONALISM, AND HATRED are closely allied with man's desire to escape the realities and the truths of life which imprint themselves upon his soul. This is a troubled world in which faith should rule, but where doubt and cynicism more often prevail. Millions of people today attempt to make an escape from God into rationalism and hate, whenever justice and truth demand an unyielding stand against godless tyranny.

Herod Antipas, the Tetrarch of Galilee, becomes the symbol of man today who is involved in coming to grips with the truth of God and who tries to evade facing the realities of truth by resorting to various forms of sensationalism. Herod becomes the symbol of man who has Christ on his hands, but who is only interested in what he can gain for himself from association with Him. He becomes the symbol of man's mad pursuit of rationalism or intellectualism as a means of escaping from the absolute authority of the Divine. Finally, Herod becomes the symbol of man's effort to escape truth by his flight into hatred.

In Herod we have the symbol of a man who looks upon religion only as an interesting pastime and an amusing spectacle,

to whom even the most sublime and holy things are simply comedy. He becomes a symbol of man who intrudes upon religion for the aesthetic emotions thereby excited.

Let us direct our attention to the Biblical story. You will recall that in the uproar at Pilate's hall, the governor is overjoyed when he hears that Jesus Christ is a Galilean. With extreme satisfaction, Pilate exclaims: "He belongs, then, to Herod's jurisdiction." And with the order to have Jesus bound over to the latter, he feels as if a mountain were removed from his breast. He now believes that he has shifted the responsibility of acquitting or condemning Christ to the shoulders of Herod Antipas, in whose jurisdiction Galilee lay. Herod is in Jerusalem just then because of the Passover Feast.

Now we already know something of Herod before the pitiful scene which is presented to us in the passion narrative. This ruler is the same despicable libertine who caused the imprisonment and death of John the Baptist.<sup>1</sup> And by this act, you will recall, Herod's prestige among the Jews was forfeited. John had pointed the finger of accusation at Herod for the immoral act of which he was guilty—living with his brother Philip's wife, Herodias. But instead of acknowledging his guilt and seeking forgiveness, Herod got angry at the preacher of righteousness and incarcerated him. It was not long before the hatred which filled the heart of Herodias erupted into violence and Herod became the victim of his own sensuality. To keep face with man, he was forced to lose face with God in putting to death God's prophet.

With the transfer of Christ's trial from Pilate's hall to the court of Herod, a new opportunity was presented to him. We read: "When Herod saw Jesus he was very glad." There were the most excellent of reasons. He had heard a number of rumors that this (Jesus) was John the Baptist risen from the dead, that it was Elijah, that it was one of the old prophets come to life again.<sup>2</sup> Whether there were other reasons for his delight in

Jesus—hidden motives—we do not know. But this we know: Herod was totally engaged with the Son of God.

This Galilean tetrarch tried to escape from under the burden of his responsibility, as he had done before, by resorting to various tactics. First, he resorted to sensationalism, then to rationalism, and finally to hatred.

Herod used one of the most common forms of escape—sensationalism. Christ was a curiosity piece as far as he was concerned. He was only interested in Jesus because of the signs or miracles which Christ had performed. Herod had hoped to be entertained by this subject from Galilee. He wanted a stunt performed. But our Lord could not lend himself to such a part; He had neither words nor miracles for a man so disposed. Besides, he saw with horror the murder of John the Baptist, His fore-runner.

When Christ failed to satisfy Herod's curiosity by performing stunts or miracles and by remaining calm and silent, Herod turned to another form of escape from facing up to the person of Jesus. He began to rationalize. Christ's behavior was indeed strange, he thought, if He were the Son of God as He had claimed. And besides, the chief priests and scribes stood by, vehemently accusing Him of blasphemy. Herod reasoned: He has not performed any signs of being God's son; He has performed no miracles; there has not been one scientific shred of evidence of His divinity except His own testimony before Caiaphas and Pilate. We read that "he questioned him at some length; but he made no answer." Reason became the rule, and doubt prevailed.

There is one more factor in Herod's historic engagement with Jesus. When his design to produce a miracle failed to materialize, and when Christ by His presence defied rationalization of His person, Herod became angry and contemptuous. It is written: "Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him." He hated Jesus for doing the thing He was doing to him—being what Christ was, God. He made Herod con-

scious of what he was, a sinner. Christ was incarnate conscience. Herod's long quarrel with God had reached its height. As with John the Baptist, so with Christ—and much more so—Herod tried to make hatred for the preacher of righteousness and holiness a substitute for true repentance.

It is no wonder that Herod and Pilate became friends with each other. They both had faced the truth and did not measure up to the test of truth for their souls. Before this episode, they had been personal enemies; now, they were friends. But they joined together as enemies of the gospel.

None of us wants to be identified with "that fox"<sup>3</sup> Herod. He was one of the greatest cynics of all time. We certainly disavow any relationship between this sensualist and ourselves. And yet, Herod's kind is not dead. Man's conduct today is largely motivated by self-interest. There are always those who are restless and looking for something new and fascinating by which to escape from reality. There are those who consider faith a superstition left far behind, who permit reason to rule and doubt to prevail. And there are millions of people today who make the same escape from God into hate.

First of all, let us look at some kinds of sensationalism in which people seek escape from God. You and I can find examples in the Bible and they sound rather up to date. Gay Israel dances before a golden calf. Covetous Lot dips into the big city thrills of Sodom. Lustful Samson flirts with Delilah. Glamor boy Absalom leads a revolution against his father, King David. Excited crowds beg Jesus Christ for miraculous stunts. But while Israel dances, the inescapable God hovers over Mount Sinai. While Lot is in Sodom, God prepares fire and brimstone to rain upon it. While Samson sports with Delilah, God drains his strength from him. While Absalom wars, God snatches him by his insolent hair and hangs him from a tree. While the crowds cry for stunts, He who is himself the inescapable God haunts them with His cross!

There are plenty of parallels today. There is, for example, the



sensationalism of what is new and fashionable. A popular escape it is. Perhaps it is a new and colorful car. Or it may be the latest in clothing. It may be a new place to live. Moreover, when homes are broken it is probably from God that someone is really running away, going off into some new and different situation. And then there are those people who quit one job after another, always looking for something new. Could it be that they are often running away, yes, perhaps even from God.

Other examples are not hard to find. Public print depends heavily on sensationalism for its mass appeal—sensational stories, sensational news, sensational pictures, sensational advertisement. Popular entertainment is certainly sensational. Take gambling, for instance. Its appeal is fever in the blood as well as money in the pocket, a fever which helps a man to forget God. The movies are for millions an escape into sensationalism. The use of alcoholic beverages is plainly just another form of escape.

But nobody escapes God in these ways, any more than Herod Antipas did. God gave Herod something sensational he wasn't looking for when on Calvary a chain of "miracles" or "signs" wrapped itself around the death of Jesus Christ—a miraculous darkness at noonday, an earthquake, an opening of the graves, and finally the resurrection of Christ from the dead.

A second escape from God which Herod illustrates is the escape of man into intellectualism or rationalism. Herod was something of a rationalist. He entertained some powerful doubts about God. He doubted whether it would make any difference if he did as he pleased. He doubted that God knew enough about politics to understand the predicament he was in. So he declared his intellectual independence from God.

God has supremely called men to serve Him, and the Herods of today flee Him into the labyrinth of their own minds. They flee Him into philosophy without theology, into science without creation, into economics without stewardship, into sociology without the church, and into psychology without salvation.

But the intellectualists, whether big or little, must find that

Christ is not so easily escaped. Philosophers are still bothered with the God they had declared emeritus. Scientists still find that the God they had disproved is still in their test tubes. Today scientists gingerly finger their nuclear weapons, wistfully hoping that there may still be a God to take them off their hands. Even radio Moscow officially admits that many of the Soviet people still believe in God.

Just like Herod, the modern rationalists flee from the Word of God. Man is proud. Man prefers doubt to faith. Man wants to discover truth; he doesn't want it revealed to him. Man doesn't want anyone to guide his thinking, not even the Almighty God who made his mind. But listen, student, professor, scientist, artist, author, statesman, God wants you! And just because He is God, He wants you on His own terms. God wants, and the world desperately needs, Christian intellectuals—men and women who before they enter laboratory or study reverently bow to the God from whom, through whom, and unto whom are all things, men and women who start with the belief that God exists and that He has revealed himself in the person of His Son Jesus Christ and in the Bible. God wants the most brilliant minds and the most skilled hands. He wants philosophers who believe in order that they may know, scientists who treat every fact as God created and God revealed, artists who receive and portray all true beauty as of God, and leaders in every sphere who believe in divine providence and in divine law.

Finally, there was a third factor in Herod's escape from God. It was hatred. This was the basic reason that Herod refused to recognize Christ as king and ruler in men's hearts. Herod couldn't stand to think that Christ might show his nation a way out of her plight. Nursing his hate and thinking dark thoughts, he sent Jesus back to Pilate, supposing that he was leaving Christ to His doom.

Millions of people make the same escape from God into hate today. Today too we have hostility between nations. Cold war

we call it. Surely justice and truth demand an unyielding stand against godless tyranny, and God certainly would not have us forsake the defense of our liberties. But when we malign those whom we oppose, when we yield to malice, and when hatred flashes, then we are escaping from God rather than rallying to His cause. Herod evidently preferred the death of Christ to the conversion of his nation. What of us? Which do we more fervently desire? The reform of tyranny or its conquest? The repentance of our enemies or their overthrow? Are we cursing our nation, or are we praying for it? Does God have to destroy nations today, perhaps including our own, because we do not preach to them? Or will we turn from hate and tell the world of God's mercy and love?

Of course, it is the same escape from God into hate when people yield to the bitterness of race and class struggle, when they give themselves to personal malice and animosity, when thoughts are poisoned by spite and words are sharpened by hostility, and when they resort to violence.

Herod's flight into hate was a hate not only against Jesus, but also against himself. Yes, he hates himself. The voice of conscience that reproaches him is the voice of God, but he still will not listen. Madly he flees in the blackness of self-hate as he treats Jesus with contempt. This could be the moment of repentance for Herod. But there is no cry for mercy. There is no turning back to God.

Christ is confronting him, and Herod hates. Herod stands for all of us. We are all inclined by nature to hate. I am Herod. You are Herod, too, friend. It's your fellow man that you hate. It's yourself that you hate. But deepest and darkest, Herod, it's God that you hate. You can't bear, can you, Herod, His all-seeing eye, looking into your depth, into all your shame and ugliness?

Look again, Herod! That God who pursues you has a mighty crown, but it's a crown of thorns. He carries a royal scepter, but it's only a reed. He wears a gorgeous robe, but it's stained

with blood. Those great arms are in submission, but spread on a cross. Those strong hands are bound, and pierced with nails.

Listen, Herod! He's speaking now. "For the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost."<sup>4</sup> That's you, Herod. Turn to Him now while He still pursues you in love, lest He turn at last and leave you to the unending blackness of your hate.

Indeed, we are called upon, like Herod, to handle the case for our own souls as Jesus appears before us in the presence of His Word. What then will we do with Jesus who is called the Christ?

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 14:1-12

<sup>2</sup> Luke 9:7-9

<sup>3</sup> Luke 12:32

<sup>4</sup> Luke 19:10

[Jesus] answered them, "When it is evening, you say, 'It will be fair weather; for the sky is red.' And in the morning, 'It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign shall be given to it except the sign of Jonah."

Matthew 16:2-4

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After this many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him. Jesus said to the twelve, "Will you also go away?" Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God." Jesus answered them, "Did I not choose you, the twelve, and one of you is a devil?" He spoke of Judas the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the twelve, was to betray him. John 6:66-71

Then one of the twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, "What will you give me if I deliver him to you?" And they paid him thirty pieces of silver. And from that moment he sought an opportunity to betray him. Matthew 26:14-16

When it was evening, he sat at table with the twelve disciples; and as they were eating, he said, "Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me." And they were very sorrowful, and began to say to him one after another, "Is it I, Lord?" . . . Judas, who betrayed him, said, "Is it I, Master?" He said to him, "You have said so." Matthew 26:20-22, 25

. . . Judas came, one of the twelve, and with a great crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people. Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, "The one I shall kiss is the man; seize him." And he came up to Jesus at once and said, "Hail Master!" And he kissed him. Matthew 26:47-49

When Judas, his betrayer, saw that he was condemned, he repented and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders, saying, "I have sinned in betraying innocent blood." They said, "What is that to us? See to it yourself." And throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed; and he went and hanged himself. Matthew 27:3-5

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## CHAPTER FIVE

# IN THE HANDS OF TREACHEROUS MAN— JUDAS ISCARIOT

(Meditation for Fourth Week in Lent)

COVETOUSNESS AND GREED are the besetting sins of sensual man. From these controlling passions of unregenerate man issue forth the most violent forms of cruel and wicked deeds. Certainly, among these are the twin sins of materialistic man, faithlessness and treachery.

Strangely enough, even when man is conscientiously aware of these foul offenses against God and society, he is incapable of helping himself. Often, he does not know where to turn for help; or if he does, he has reached the point where he will not avail himself of that help. His distress, provoked by his sense of guilt, is like a gnawing pain constantly driving him to desperation as he contemplates his sad predicament. Finally, in painful regret for violating his conscience and following his unprincipled passions, he remorsefully condemns himself to hell.

Judas Iscariot becomes the symbol of such a man. He becomes the symbol of treacherous man who violates the contract of mutual trust between friend and friend, who severs the ties

of allegiance and faith which create true concern for one's fellow man. Driven on by covetousness and greed, Judas becomes the symbol of man who sells his soul for worldly gain and profit. Further, he becomes the symbol of the cowardly and unstable man who cannot face reality, and who, in his complete frustration, is devoid of sound judgment and takes self-destruction as the way out of his sorrowful dilemma. Finally, Judas becomes the symbol of remorseful man who is exceedingly sorry for his sins, who bitterly regrets his insidious plot against heaven, and who finally comes to the realization that this world's goods do not satisfy the soul of man; but notwithstanding, he does not know the way out of his misery and grief.

Although we are without much factual knowledge of the life of Judas Iscariot, we certainly can form a reasonably accurate image of his infancy, youth, and manhood.

About the same time as the angels of God sang their anthem of joy at Christ's appearance, there must have been joy also in the house of a man named Simon of Kerieth. For of this family was also born a son, a mother's joy, a father's pride. The lad was called Judas which means "Praise of God."

It is not unreasonable to presume that Judas was an intelligent and capable young man. He was certainly not a heathen; he was a child of God. He was reared in the faith of his fathers since infancy. He was bathed in the sunlight of the Old Testament law and prophets.

In young manhood Judas became attracted to the Master. The Galilean's character and teaching were such as to captivate his imagination and to appeal to his zeal for the way of holiness and righteousness. He met the Master, loved Him, and followed Him. He was not a hypocrite, at least not consciously so. As he learned, together with the other disciples, he was no doubt an earnest and honest student. The Lord in full confidence appointed Judas to the important office of treasurer in the company; this certainly was because He felt Judas best qualified for the task.



No, Judas was not from the beginning "the son of perdition";<sup>1</sup> he was not always an unfaithful and treacherous man; there was a time when Judas enjoyed the intimate and rewarding relationships of true friendship with the Master.

Why, then, we ask, did Judas betray his Lord? why did he deal so treacherously with the Son of God; why did he fall from grace? Why, indeed! Many have tried to give satisfactory answers to these perplexing questions. Some have explained away Judas' mean conduct on the grounds of his disappointment that Christ was not a nationalistic messiah. The sooner Christ realized this, the better it would be for all. Others have attempted to gloss over the betrayal as the act of a depressed maniac. Still others have suggested that Judas was only interested in saving his own skin. It is extremely difficult for man to understand the motive or motives which caused Judas to act in this manner. But no excuse can justify his cowardly deed.

One explanation is true beyond a doubt. In two of the Gospels it is said that "Satan entered into him."<sup>2</sup> From this root grew all kinds of evil: covetousness, greed, treachery, faithlessness, cowardice, worldiness, and so forth.

We remember that Judas had been joined to Jesus by a bond of allegiance when he became a disciple. Together with all the other disciples, he had manifested true faithfulness. Even when many of the other disciples\* drew back and no longer went about with Christ, the Twelve remained loyal. Judas was one of the inner circle. Jesus held no man by force or coercion.

It wasn't long, however, before Judas began to drift away from the Lord. He began to yield to the temptation thrust upon him as keeper of the company funds to steal what was put into the treasury.<sup>3</sup> He became an embezzler of sacred funds. And he became the dupe and the victim of successful sin. He was getting away with sinning. If poor Judas had been sorely wounded in his first tampering with the company funds, he may well have come to hate it and turn away from it. But, unfortunately, he seemed to prosper in wrongdoing, and ultimately became mar-

ried to the very thing that would mean his utter destruction. Though Judas knew the Lord intimately, he was not beyond the clutches of Satan. The sin of covetousness and greed grew in his soul like a creeping cancer. It wasn't long before his love for the world and the things of the world negated his love for Jesus Christ.<sup>4</sup>

Driven by the burning desire for worldly gain, Judas became "putty in the hands" of those who desired to use him to ungodly advantage. Despite pious sentiment, he felt himself slowly slipping away from the honorable and righteous path and toward the course of self-interest and self-gain.

Judas Iscariot, as he leaves the Upper Room that night long ago, was not only an unfaithful man running away from self-delusion, not only an avaricious man running away from poverty, but also a cowardly man running away from reality. Judas' cowardly nature could not face up to the reality of the way of the Cross. He sought the cover of night to hide from himself. Judas resigned from life. He possessed neither the courage nor fortitude to stand up to its reality.

We note that when Judas saw that Jesus was condemned, he repented and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, saying, "I have sinned in betraying innocent blood." He was filled with remorse. He was deeply sorry for what he had done. He confessed his sin. Of him, however, we read that "he went and hanged himself." His remorse led to self-destruction. His sorrow over his sin of betrayal led not to his salvation, but to his utter condemnation.

What a tragedy, the case of Judas! He went to the wrong church with his confession. How different the story might have been, if he had gone back to his fellow disciples, or better still, to Jesus himself. But he went to the Temple, to those same priests and elders with whom he had made his foul bargain. He poured out his soul to them. But they had no gospel for a guilty sinner. There was nothing in the Temple for Judas, even though it was the one place where he should have been able to find the

mercy of God. The priests told him bluntly that his problem was no concern of theirs. He would have to solve it himself.

So he did the only way he could find. First, he thought he might get relief by throwing those thirty pieces of silver down on the temple floor. They were not only worthless to him now, but he couldn't stand to have them in his purse. They not only condemned him, but cursed him. He had to get rid of them.

But that didn't help. It wasn't the money that tortured him. It was the deed, and that couldn't be undone. It could only be forgiven by the One against whom it had been done. But tragically for his own soul, Judas wasn't looking for forgiveness. Maybe he didn't know where to look for it. But somehow he had to silence his guilty conscience; he had to quiet his tormented soul. The gospel of his Master held no hope for him; he had repudiated that. And there was no gospel anywhere else for him, not even in the Temple. So, to find peace, he chose death—the worst thing he could have chosen, for the unrepentant sinner never finds peace in death.

Judas handled the Son of God and betrayed Him to His enemies. He permitted Satan to fill his heart and to dispose of God by faithlessness and treachery.

Now, all men are great sinners, no better than Judas, and in some respects perhaps even worse. Is this why Christianity fails? Are there too many Judases among men today?

Millions of men and women have been brought into covenant relationship with God. They have been reared in the fear and admonition of the Lord. They have renounced the devil and all his ways. They have been instructed in God's Word and have been led to the knowledge of His will and of His gracious gospel. They have promised to abide in the holy Christian faith and as members of the Christian church to be diligent in the use of the means of grace and in prayer. They have made public, as well as private, profession of their most holy faith. They

have been co-workers with Christ. They have been divinely appointed to positions of guardianship and trust for His riches of grace.

Then comes Satan, and the forces of hell erupt in their souls. The promises of former years and former friendships are quickly forgotten, and they forsake Christ and His church. The world with its cares and riches has crowded in upon their souls. Many of them have sold Christ with baser coin than thirty pieces of silver.

Man declares his independence of God; he explains the world in terms of naturalism and materialism alone. He looks upon his former faith as hopelessly naive. He seeks first the thrills and adventures of sensual indulgence. He steals from God by his betrayal of Him in the stewardship of time, talent, and treasure.

Satan and the world seize upon this opportunity to deceive man completely. Though man maintains a form of religion, he denies the power of it. The description that Paul gives in his Second Letter to Timothy seems most adequately to express the treachery and the faithlessness of man when he permits demon powers to lead him to self-destruction: "For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, inhuman, implacable, slanderers, profligates, fierce, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding the forms of religion but denying the power of it."<sup>5</sup>

Man, too, is cowardly. When the stark facts of life confront man, he is tempted to run away. When the demands of the gospel compel him to decisive action, he shrinks from honest appraisal and runs for cover. He does this by his escape into solitude; he is by himself, and no one can see. He escapes by furiously giving himself to his work in order not to have time

to think about the ultimate questions of his relationship with Jesus Christ. Man attempts to escape reality by many other means, such as drink, change of scenery, sickness of a sort, and yes, even religion.

Only under the impact of God's holy law does man come to himself and realize his treachery, his faithlessness, his greed, his covetousness, and his worldliness. How does he feel about his sin? And what does he do about it? If he feels nothing but remorse—sorrow for his sin—he is like Judas, and that can lead only to suicide, in one way or another. Many a man commits spiritual suicide, though never even contemplating physical self-destruction. Remorse is really no more than self-accusation, which can easily become self-pity, and then self-destruction. The remorseful sinner feels sorry for what he has done, not to God or to others, but to himself.

Remorse may be good as far as it goes, but it doesn't go far enough. It may be a sort of confession that does some good to the soul, but if it never gets beyond that, it will eventually do more harm than good. Remorse may become a dangerous complex that brings nothing but misery and contempt for oneself. Plain remorse can never bring salvation, unless it becomes repentance. For salvation is forgiveness, which depends upon the mercy of God. Remorse doesn't ask for mercy. It asks only for some way to undo the deed, if possible, or otherwise, to escape the consequences. But sin cannot be undone. It can only be forgiven. And only God can do that. And He does it only for those who go out and weep bitterly for their sin and beg for the mercy and the forgiveness of God.

Again, we are called upon to answer Pilate's question. "What then shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" Will we betray Him like Judas who presumed upon the intimate relationship he enjoyed with the Savior? Will we deal with Him treacherously like the coward from Kerioth who tried to hide from the all-seeing eye of God? Will we sell our souls like greedy Judas who

loved this world's goods more than life itself? Will we run away like the disciple who proved unworthy of the trust placed in him by the Master? Or, will we acknowledge our covetousness and greed and turn back to Him for forgiveness and life and salvation? What will we do with Jesus?

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<sup>1</sup> John 17:12

<sup>2</sup> Luke 22:3 and John 13:27

<sup>3</sup> John 12:6

<sup>4</sup> 1 John 2:15-17

<sup>5</sup> 2 Timothy 3:2-5

\* Many of those who followed Christ were called disciples; they comprised the larger circle of His company. They were repelled by Christ's teaching of eating His flesh and drinking His blood which they took literally. Their loyalty couldn't stand the strain, and they forsook Him. The Twelve stood firm in their loyalty to Jesus, however.

Mary took a pound of costly ointment of pure nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the fragrance of the ointment. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was to betray him), said, "Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" This he said, not that he cared for the poor but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box he used to take what was put into it. Jesus said, "Let her alone, let her keep it for the day of my burial. The poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me."

John 12:3-8

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"Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren." And he said to him, "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death." He said, "I tell you, Peter, the cock will not crow this day, until you three times deny that you know me." Luke 22:31-34

Then they seized him and led him away, bringing him into the high priest's house. Peter followed at a distance; and when they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat among them. Then a maid, seeing him as he sat in the light and gazing at him, said, "This man also was with him." But he denied it, saying, "Woman, I do not know him." And a little later some one else saw him and said, "You also are one of them." But Peter said, "Man, I am not." And after an interval of about an hour still another insisted, saying, "Certainly this man also was with him; for he is a Galilean." But Peter said, "Man, I do not know what you are saying." And immediately, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed. And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, "Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly. Luke 22:54-62

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## CHAPTER SIX

# IN THE HANDS OF FAITHLESS MAN—SIMON PETER

(Meditation for Fifth Week in Lent—Passion Week)

NOTHING IS HIGHER OR MORE EXALTED than the imitation of Jesus Christ. We must immediately add, however, that nothing is harder or more difficult. In man's sincere efforts to follow in the footsteps of Christ, he experiences distressing moments of weakness and failure. Even his best efforts are not sufficient at times. He stumbles and falls.

Why is this? Is it because the footsteps of Christ are impossible to follow? Does man falter because the way is too difficult to find, and there is not a clear light upon the road, if indeed there is any light at all?

No! Man was created in the image of God, and the Creator has endowed him with powers equal to the task of following the example of His Son, Jesus Christ. God has called man to follow in Christ's steps.<sup>1</sup> He would never have invited man to seek this attainment, if it were not possible for him to do so. It is possible to follow in His footsteps. But man without the light is not able to follow after the Lord. Jesus said: "I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."<sup>2</sup> Man has all the light that is needed for

the guidance of his feet into the paths of blessedness and peace, for he has the gospel—the full revelation of God to man.

Man stumbles because he follows the Lord with feet of clay—mortal man with sinful nature. He loses sight of the road and the blessed imprint of the Son of God, because he follows Him from afar. Man's cut-flower faith cannot stand up against the winds of the world that blow bitterly against it. Man does not fully rely upon the Light of the World to illumine the pathway before him. Man prefers the darkness to the light. He loses the way because of the cares and the anxieties of this life.

Simon Peter was such a man. He had lost his way in the darkness of the night. He becomes the symbol of man today who, in human weakness, forsakes the Lord because he does not count the exacting cost of Christian discipleship.<sup>3</sup> Peter becomes the symbol of impulsive man who rallies to the worthwhile cause, but who, when the demands of the cause require self-denial and personal sacrifice, deserts and quits. Further, Simon Peter becomes the symbol of man who is deeply moved by his grievous offense and gross unfaithfulness, and who is brought to true repentance, forgiven his sin, and restored to life-giving fellowship with his Savior and Lord.

We know that Peter, along with Judas, was guilty of great and shameful sins against the Lord in the hour of His most bitter suffering. Judas betrayed Him; Peter denied Him. Both were deeply sorry for what they had done. But the one, Judas, self-accused and self-pitying, committed suicide; the other, Peter, also self-accused and self-pitying, found salvation. The one never saw Easter with its message of hope and victory; the other experienced in the resurrection of Christ a new-found life—forgiveness of the sins of denial and faithlessness. We have already considered Judas' sad plight in an earlier chapter. Let us now turn and join ourselves in spirit to Simon Peter.

From his very first meeting with Jesus, when he had been introduced to the Master by his brother Andrew,<sup>4</sup> until the fateful hour of his bitter denial, Simon Peter had been ardently at-

tached to the Lord. He loved Jesus, though the true nature of that love may be open to debate. It must have been a strong and personal affection which demanded his very best for Christ. Peter knew that his salvation was bound up in this Person, and that without Him he would perish. He had had too many incredible experiences as a disciple not to realize this. Therefore, he must give himself without reservation to the Master, come what may.

Simon Peter was a trustworthy and loyal subject of the King. He had declared his intention to serve his Lord at all times and in every conceivable way. He stood ready, as a dedicated soldier, to defend his Lord. On the evening of Christ's seizure, Peter had boasted that, even if all the other disciples fell away from the Lord, he would remain faithful. He even went so far as to declare his willingness to go to prison and to death with Christ rather than to deny Him. The gospel record is replete with accounts of Peter's unswerving fidelity and allegiance to Jesus Christ.

Christ, on the other hand, had great confidence in Peter, even to the point of declaring him to be a strong rock of a man upon whom He could found His church.<sup>5</sup> The Lord recognized the tremendous possibilities in Peter, and even though there were pitiful fallings away, eventually these great potentials were realized. Recognizing these rock strengths, Jesus prayed for Peter that his faith would not fail, and that he would be a source of strength to the disciples and to those other brethren who would come to believe on Him.

In the story of the Savior's trial, Peter was completely beside himself. He didn't know which way to turn. Like the impulsive creature he was, he moved from the one extreme to the other. Peter's impulsiveness is characterized vividly by O. P. Kretzmann and A. C. Oldsen in their book of first-person meditations for the Lenten season:

Throughout his life, until his fall, Peter is a child of impulse. One moment he walks confidently upon the water;

three seconds later he is sinking and calling for help. One minute he makes a remarkable confession of Christ, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God" and wins Christ's commendation, "Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona"; the next minute he protests against Christ's announcement of His impending Passion, "Be it far from Thee, Lord!" and merits Christ's rebuke, "Get thee behind me, Satan."<sup>6</sup> On the way to the garden he vows his readiness to die for his Lord; in the garden he cannot keep awake for his Lord. When the mob comes to take Christ, he draws his unfamiliar sword and shows he has courage, if need be, to fight the Roman army; when he is in the courtyard, that same evening, among the same enemies, he wilts under the glance of a slave maiden and cowardly denies his Lord.<sup>7</sup>

Poor Peter! He had Jesus on his hands, and just didn't know what he should do with Him. He wanted so much to imitate his Lord's example—to walk in His footsteps—but he was weak and he failed his wonderful Friend in the hour of bitter trial.

The scene of the actual denial of the Lord by Peter is a dramatic one. Count von Ferdinand Harrach has painted a masterpiece in his portrayal of the scene: *Peter's Denial*. It is more than an immortal work of art; it is a spiritual experience. We note Peter warming himself at the soldiers' fire in the courtyard of the high priest. His head is slightly bowed as he looks at the stone pavement with vacant stare. The smiling maiden is pointing an accusing finger while the soldiers are turned to look upon him. The crowing cock is shown above him on a grape vine adjacent to the courtyard where the person of Christ stands, bound, with soldier guard, and focuses his sorrowful eyes upon Peter.

We read: "And the Lord turned and looked at Peter." What was in that look? What was the meaning of that look? Elizabeth Barret Browning described what she believes was contained in it in her poem, "The Meaning of the Look":

I think that look of Christ might seem to say—  
"Thou Peter! art thou then a common stone  
Which I at last must break my heart upon,

For all God's charge to his high angels may  
Guard my foot better? Did I yesterday  
Wash *thy* feet, my beloved, that they should run  
Quick to deny me 'neath the morning sun?  
And do thy kisses, like the rest, betray?  
The cock crows coldly. — Go, and manifest  
A late contrition, but no bootless fear!  
For when thy final need is dreariest,  
Thou shalt not be denied, as I am here;  
My voice to God and angels shall attest,  
*Because I KNOW this man, let him be clear."*

How ashamed Peter was! How guilty! He could never undo what he had done. He had proven faithless when he should have been most faithful. His boasts that he would never fail his Lord were simply empty phrases. He had never really counted the exacting cost of discipleship. He had been duped by Satan. "And he went out and wept bitterly."

This was not the end, however. Three days later, after all those tearful hours of repentance, Peter's Lord, who had risen from the grave, found him and forgave him. In fact, before He ever confronted Peter, Christ sent him a special Easter message of mercy. One of His angels at the empty tomb instructed the women to "tell his disciples and Peter"<sup>8</sup> that He would see them soon. Peter was mentioned by name, singled out for a personal visit, a private interview with his Lord. And so through his tears of true repentance he found forgiveness and salvation.

Peter repented of his faithlessness. He begged for mercy and sought forgiveness. He hated his sin and forsook it, returning to God. He clung to God's skirts, and like the Psalmist David prayed, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Cast me not away from thy presence, and take not thy holy Spirit from me."<sup>9</sup>

Simon Peter is a representative of man today who has denied the Lord. This denial of Jesus Christ can take many forms.

It may be that man who, like Peter, makes claims to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. Man knows in a vague sort of way that if he is to be saved at all, it must be because of the Savior's death. He has a loose attachment toward Christ's church. But he does not want to become too involved with it. He desires to follow Christ "afar off"—not too close and yet, not too far away either. Or man, who professes Christ, has not really counted the cost of discipleship. Like a hypocrite, he puts on a bold front, but when he is asked to stand up and be counted, he backs away like a coward on the battlefield, like a Peter in the courtyard. Or, like Peter, man who has professed allegiance to Christ is found warming himself at the enemy's fire. He loves the world and succumbs to the wiles of the devil in his pathetic craving for the pleasures of this world.

Simon Peter is also a symbol of man today who repents of his denials and finds forgiveness, life, and salvation. Man weeps real tears not merely because of what his sin has done to himself and to others, but because of what it has done to God. With a conscience illuminated by the Holy Spirit he sees his sin as an act of rebellion against God. Of course, his sin hurts everybody, but the One who is most deeply wounded is the One who loves man best. The sufferings of Jesus Christ were not ended with Calvary. Day by day man is sinning against God's love and mercy.

Remorse for having sinned against God may be good as far it goes, but it doesn't go far enough. It may be a sort of confession that does some good to the soul; but if it never gets beyond that, it will eventually do more harm than good. It may become a dangerous guilt complex that brings nothing but misery. Remorse can never bring salvation, unless it becomes repentance. For salvation is forgiveness, which depends upon the mercy of God.

You and I have Christ on our hands. God grant that we may not deny or quit Him in life's critical hour! Let us not lose the way because we fail to avail ourselves of the light of God's Word! Let us not forsake the Lord because we have not counted the

exacting cost of Christian discipleship! But rather, let us be convinced of our sin and faithlessness and be brought to true repentance and receive the blessed forgiveness of our sin. Let us walk in Christ's footsteps! Let us glorify His name among all peoples!

In the hour of trial,  
Jesus, plead for me,  
Lest by base denial  
I depart from Thee;  
When Thou seest me waver,  
With a look recall,  
Nor from fear or favor  
Suffer me to fall.

JAMES MONTGOMERY

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Peter 2:21 (Cf. Matthew 16:24 and Mark 8:34.)

<sup>2</sup> John 8:12

<sup>3</sup> Luke 14:25-35

<sup>4</sup> John 1:40-42

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 16:18

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 16:16-23 (KJV)

<sup>7</sup> O. P. Kretzmann and A. C. Oldsen, *Voices of the Passion*, Ernst Kaufmann, Inc., New York and Chicago, 1944, pp. 25, 26. Used by permission.

<sup>8</sup> Mark 16:7

<sup>9</sup> Psalm 51:11

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And when they drew near to Jerusalem and came to Bethphage, to the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find an ass tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If any one says anything to you, you shall say, 'The Lord has need of them,' and he will send them immediately." This took place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet, saying,

"Tell the daughter of Zion,  
Behold, your king is coming to you,  
humble, and mounted on an ass,  
and on a colt, the foal of an ass."

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the ass and the colt, and put their garments on them, and he sat thereon. Most of the crowd spread their garments on the road. And the crowds that went before him and that followed him shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed be he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" And when he entered Jerusalem, all the city was stirred, saying, "Who is this?" And the crowds said, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth of Galilee." Matthew 21:1-11

Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to release for the crowd any one prisoner whom they wanted. And they had then a notorious prisoner, called Barabbas. So when they had gathered, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you, Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?" . . . And they said, "Barabbas." Pilate said to them, "Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ"? They all said, "Let him be crucified." And he said, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified." Matthew 27:15-17, 21b-23

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

# IN THE HANDS OF ERRATIC MAN—THE CROWD

(Meditation for Sixth Week in Lent—Holy Week)

SO MUCH IN LIFE depends upon the point of view. Two men, beholding the same mighty cataract, may see different things. The one, an artist, beholds the beauty of the violent rapids rushing headlong over the precipice to the gorge beneath, and he desires to paint this magnificent scene. The other man, a scientist, sees in these fierce waters the hydroelectric power which can be generated by harnessing these waters. Now, of course, both these observations are correct. They both see the fact, this natural wonder, but one sees it simply from an aesthetic point of view while the other sees it simply from a scientific point of view.

It makes a great difference *how* a man looks at a thing! It will determine what he sees in it. This is particularly true when man looks at the greatest event in human history: the cross of Jesus Christ. Some people see clearly that the Cross is God's gift of salvation for a lost world. They embrace it and cherish it. But many other people never see this. They describe the Cross in altogether different terms. They reject it. They miss the point of it completely.

Nowhere is this more tragically demonstrated than in the viewpoint of the crowds toward Jesus Christ. From Palm Sunday to Good Friday a great crowd followed Him on the way to the cross. The crowd was right in the middle of the Passion story. They saw what Christ did and heard what He said. They applauded Him upon His triumphal entry into the Holy City on Sunday and jeered Him a few days later as He stood before Pontius Pilate and was led to His execution. They hailed Him as king one day and condemned Him as criminal another. All the facts were known to them firsthand, but they didn't know what to make of them. They were witnesses, and yet they were blind.

The erratic crowd becomes the symbol of man today who has Jesus Christ on his hands and who is blind as to the Person of the Son of God. The crowd becomes the symbol of man who is the helpless victim of his emotions and feelings and who is easily persuaded to change his mind about what he has seen and witnessed regarding the truth of God. The ill-governed mob becomes the symbol of fickle and unpredictable man who cannot be counted upon to defend Christ Jesus when the pressures of contrary popular opinion are brought to bear upon himself. Further, the crowd becomes the symbol of "spectator" man who simply sits on the sidelines watching the struggle of man, but never permitting himself to become involved. Finally, this mob becomes the symbol of man with his languid interests who is completely indifferent to the great issues of life.

Let us accompany the crowd and take our places beside them as they applaud and hail the Lord on Palm Sunday and as they jeer and condemn Him a few days later!

As we join the Palm Sunday crowd, we are immediately impressed with the number of familiar faces in the procession, faces that we can identify. We recognize a large number of those who constituted the Lord's congregation when He preached on the hillsides and in the market places. We notice many of the thousands who ate bread and fish He had blessed. We see

some faces of the mothers whose children the Lord had taken in His arms and blessed. Here, we see a cripple whom Christ made to walk again, there, a blind man whose eyes He had opened. Still again, we recall the faces of some of the lepers He had cleansed. And there was Lazarus whom He had raised from the dead. (In fact, it was because of the reports of the raising of Lazarus that many came out to see Him.<sup>1</sup>) Then, there was the faithful company of women who had followed Him. Naturally, among the familiar and friendly faces, there were the Lord's disciples, all of them.

To be sure, there were others also. There were the mobs who pressed in upon Jesus, the rabble who wanted to see and to touch this "curiosity piece." There were the many pilgrims in the city who had arrived lately for the Passover and who were attracted by the great commotion caused by the gala procession as it made its way through the narrow city streets. Finally, there were the avowed enemies of Christ, the Pharisees and the priests and the elders. They were there, maintaining a "holy" decorum, but standing within sight and sound of the tumultuous spectacle.

It was a festive day with a parade atmosphere. A few went before and behind Christ hailing Him as the promised King, the Messiah. Some spread their garments along the path of the humble beast which carried the Master. Others took branches from the palm trees and waved them in happy mood. To many their praise was the utterance of deep, genuine, and adoring conviction. They saw in Jesus the realization of some of their most solemn beliefs and most eager expectations. They believed in Him as their glorious Redeemer.

It is safe to say, however, that while the many hailed the Christ, few understood His real majesty. With many it was mere sentimental enthusiasm which departed with the day. Most of the group were indifferent. A few of those who watched were filled with envy and hatred, namely, the ecclesiastical rulers of the people.

The scene now shifts to another day and to another crowd.

This crowd was gathered in the palace courtyard of the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, and followed the Palm Sunday crowd by only a few days.

This same Jesus of Nazareth was again the center of attraction. In this setting, however, He was under arrest and in the custody of the civil authorities. His hands were bound. His head was crowned with thorns. His face was pale with anguish. His back was bloody from the scourging. His person was the object of scorn and ridicule. He was mocked and spit upon. This picture of the Christ was one of great contrast from that of a few days earlier.

The faces in this crowd were not too familiar. Conspicuous by their absence were the disciples, all of them. Also absent were the intimate and loyal friends of Christ. They had forsaken Him and fled when He was arrested. These loyal friends, who had but a few days earlier hailed Him as their king, had vanished.

We recognize, however, many of the faces we had seen a few days earlier. In fact, we are amazed at the number of those now present who were also present on Palm Sunday. There were many of the multitudes who followed after Christ and who, at one time, had tried to force Him to become their King.<sup>2</sup> There was the rabble who were thoroughly enjoying themselves in the commotion. And, of course, there were the chief priests and elders, who were also present. On this occasion they were not maintaining legal and "holy" distance from the people, but they were in the very center of activity, moving freely among the crowd and speaking in a most derisive and abusive manner.

Yes, many of those who applauded and hailed the Lord a few days before were present in the courtyard and were participants in the strange drama taking place. Presumably, the greater portion of the crowd was not unfriendly with Jesus, at least not at first. As the contrived evidence began to pile up against Jesus, they were no doubt sympathetic toward the Lord.

This affinity toward Christ, however, was short lived. The chief priests stirred up the crowd and used their prestige and influence among the people against Jesus.<sup>3</sup> The crowd was invited to join in the sport of mocking and ridiculing the Savior. Soon they became delirious with excitement. They permitted themselves to mouth insult and slander without any regard for the facts in the case. They may have been mere imitators. Hearing this pack of human hounds yelping at Jesus, they may have joined with them, just to be with the crowd. They may have had no better answer for their unseemly conduct than, "Everybody's doing it."

Fickle and false, the crowd was turned into a bloodthirsty mob demanding the death of the innocent Jesus and petitioning for the outright release of the guilty Barabbas, a notorious criminal. These misguided souls became helpless victims of their emotions and feelings. Only a few days before they had acclaimed Christ as their king; now, they had forgotten His promise of life and salvation and were instrumental in putting to death the Prince of Glory.

How could these people see what they had seen and be so blind? How could they listen to what the Lord had said and be so deaf? How could they be witnesses of His mighty works and not understand? Did the Lord have these in mind when he was speaking to His disciples about the mysteries of the kingdom of God: "seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand"?<sup>4</sup>

These are easy questions for man today to ask because he has the perspective of nineteen hundred years. He can look back upon these scenes not only in the light of history, but also in the light of Holy Scripture, and so he can see the meaning of it more clearly. It is easier for him to understand that the cross of Christ is the only hope of the world, that it is the place where the Son of God made peace for man by His holy and precious blood. Man knows that Christ is a king. He knows that His

entry into Jerusalem was the prelude to Calvary where He made atonement for man's sins on the cross. Man today knows that He was not a criminal, that He was not guilty of the things for which He was condemned, that He was not the helpless victim of evil men. He knows that Christ died to save mankind from their sins, and that He did it voluntarily, that this was the purpose for which He came into the world.

And yet, does man really know that today? How many of *us* know it? Is the number proportionately larger than it was nineteen hundred years ago? Or are we still nothing but casual spectators, members of the non-committal crowd, even though we have all the advantages of history and revelation?

Every year again, when we find ourselves in Holy Week, we are confronted by the Cross. We are there again in the streets of the Holy City. We are again in Pilate's court. We are there again on Calvary. We go to church to hear sermons and sing hymns. We see pictures and read stories in the newspapers. We even find the cross in stores and shops. Yes, and it is presented to us in the light of Easter. This is the climax of many weeks in which our world is called to stand at the Cross again, to see what happened there. Nobody can really escape the occasion. *We are all there.* In a sense, we are even closer to the Cross than the Palm Sunday and Good Friday crowds, for we have been told what it means.

How many of us believe what we have been told? I'm afraid that this is still a world of spectators and crowds. Judging by the reaction of most people and by the obvious fact that we are not taking the Cross very seriously in our own lives and in the affairs of our world, few of us would be able to make bold claims of our love for the Redeemer.

Perhaps any modern city would treat Christ in the same way—a few hailing Him, and only a few understanding; most people living in indifference and crying "Crucify"! when He disappointed their envy, prejudice, and hatred. Vincent G. Burns has

described what he believes to be man's reaction to the Savior today in his poem, *If Jesus Came Back Today*:

If Jesus came back today  
What would the people say?  
Would they cheer Him and strew the way  
With garlands of myrtle and bay  
As they did on that distant day  
When He came to Jerusalem?  
What would America say  
If Jesus came back today?

I think without shadow of doubt  
When He'd traveled and spoken about  
In church and school and street  
And clubs where the rich men meet,  
His quiet, fearless smile  
At our godless greed and guile  
Would raise our wrath and bile.  
When we heard those firm lips speak  
In accents serene and meek:  
"I have come to protect the weak  
From the plunderer and the knave,  
I have come to free the slave,  
To lift the poor from the slime  
Of need and disease and crime,  
To break the grip of gold  
On my brothers, young and old;  
To throw the prisons wide  
And put the rich sinners inside  
With those who have made the law  
By the rule of fang and claw . . ."  
We would take Him and ride Him out  
Like a renegade on a rail,  
Or throw Him in the county jail  
As a dangerous, radical Red  
Who was probably off His head.

"Away with this common lout!"  
With derisive laughter and shout  
We would mock His daring dream.  
"Love?" we would fairly scream,  
"Why, what does the madman mean?  
This talk is O. K. with rubes,  
Or idealistic boobs,  
But we are men of knowledge  
Who have graduated from college.  
Look at the things we own:  
Look at our books and inventions,  
Our schools, our clubs, our conventions.  
We have more goods and gold  
Than our mansions and homes can hold  
We have all we can eat and drink,  
To the poor we freely give.  
Does this fanatic think  
He can teach *us* how to *live*?"

O doesn't it shame the dead  
And break your heart as mine  
That He who broke the bread  
And offered His life's new wine  
To serve the Cause divine,  
That He who suffered and bled  
That the hungry might be fed,  
That the workman might be free,  
That the blinded eyes might see,  
That the captive might lose his chains  
And the rich his ill-gotten gains . . .  
To think while we mouth His name  
(Does it not bring a blush of shame?)  
We so callously scorn His star  
And go hoarding and whoring afar  
Where the follies and fleshpots are?

We fashion great churches and creeds,  
But the heart of the people still bleeds



And the poor still rot in their needs.  
We display with pride His cross  
In the midst of our pagan life  
While we hug to our hearts the dross  
Of our selfishness and strife.  
What sacrifice have we made  
To live the love He prayed?  
What willing blood have we shed  
To do the deeds He said?  
To be popular and well-fed  
We forsake the way He led  
And follow a ghost instead!<sup>5</sup>

Can this be true? Is this the way it is with man today? It certainly is, if man refuses to believe in the gospel of God's grace. He is robbing himself of his real hope.

The crowds stand before the Cross today. While they stand there, the forces of evil are gaining strength. Atheistic Communism is gaining momentum, the evils of immorality are becoming more numerous and more dangerous, the waves of crime are rising higher and higher, and the minds of men are breaking under the tension of our day. So I would guess that man is only watching the Cross; he is not accepting it.

Like the crowds of yesterday, men stand at the Cross, but only as bystanders, not as believers. Here man is at the place where salvation was wrought—and he needs salvation—he needs it badly—but he doesn't want it. Man's fundamental problem is still the same, his sin. Looking at the Cross, man still asks: "What must I do to be saved?" But he refuses to believe.

"What shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" is still the question. Let us open our eyes to the Person of the Son of God, the Savior of the world, the Redeemer of man's soul! Let us be true to that which we have heard and seen and believed! Let us involve ourselves completely in the Crucifixion, confess-

ing that He died for us! Let us be among those who put their whole trust in the blood of Christ for their eternal salvation.

Let our viewpoint of the Cross be that of God's gift of salvation for a lost world, and let us embrace that Cross and cherish it forever!

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<sup>1</sup> John 12:18

<sup>2</sup> John 6:15

<sup>3</sup> Mark 15:11

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 13:13

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And the crowd came up and began to ask Pilate to do as he was wont to do for them. And he answered them, "Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" For he perceived that it was out of envy that the chief priests had delivered him up. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release for them Barabbas instead. And Pilate again said to them, "Then what shall I do with the man whom you call the King of the Jews?" And they cried out again, "Crucify him." And Pilate said to them, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Crucify him."

Mark 15:8-14

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But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices which they had prepared. And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel; and as they were frightened and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, "Why do you seek the living among the dead? Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and on the third day rise." And they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them who told this to the apostles; but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. Luke 24:1-11

Peter then came out with the other disciple, and they went toward the tomb. They both ran, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first; and stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and he went into the tomb; he saw the linen cloths lying, and the napkin, which had been on his head, not lying with the linen cloths but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not know the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. John 20:3-9

And with great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. Acts 4:33

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

# IN THE HANDS OF REDEEMED MAN—THE EASTER DISCIPLES

(Meditation for Easter)

"LIFE CAN NEVER be the same again. It must be bigger and better, higher and holier."

This assertion is the lofty resolve of the man who has come into the presence of the living Lord. Faith has been revived. Sin has been forgiven. Life has been transformed. Horizons have been extended. Tasks have been enlarged. Victory over death has been gained.

The Easter disciples become the symbol of such a man. They become the symbol of man today who has met the risen Lord and who has been transformed by the power of the Resurrection. They become the symbol of man who has the risen Christ on his hands and who has been constrained to share the message of Easter with all mankind.

Let us go and see this thing everybody talks about on Easter—the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Let us join the company of the Easter disciples as they become witnesses of one of God's great impossibles. Let us examine the evidence of the redemptive power of this historic message.

After the outrageous handling of the Christ by His enemies,

the disciples were a confused company of men. These followers of the Lord were completely stunned at the sudden turn of events which had brought the Master to such an ignominious death only a few short days after His popular acclaim by the peoples as King and Lord. In their sorrowful stupor, they entertained serious doubts that any more should ever be heard from Jesus of Galilee despite vague references to a resurrection from the dead.<sup>1</sup> They must have reasoned that Christ was mistaken about His Messianic assertions. Perhaps, they thought, He was just another prophet, after all; and His death on the cross, though unjust, was the end of everything.

Their bewilderment was compounded when the women, led by Mary Magdalene, reported the strange circumstances surrounding their early morning visit to the Master's grave. It was reported that the stone had been removed from the entrance to the grave, and that the tomb was empty. Further, the women told the disciples of the dazzling appearance of two men at the tomb who delivered a startling message: "Why do you seek the living among the dead? Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and on the third day rise."

The disciples did not at first understand how this could be; they considered it an unfounded tale. But as the women repeated their testimony of the remarkable events of their visit, a glimmer of hope lighted the hearts of the disciples. Especially, Peter and John were impressed. They went—in fact, they ran—to the tomb to see for themselves. Reaching the tomb, impulsive Peter went in. To his amazement, he saw that the body of the Lord *was* gone. The grave clothes were folded neatly where the head and body had lain. Soon after that John came in and examined the evidence. And it is said that "he saw and believed." In spite of all their unanswered questions, they simply had to believe.

The disciples could now go back home. They believed they

had seen it all. But wait! They had not actually seen *Him*, the risen Lord.

They didn't have long to wait, however, until they should have the thrilling experience of seeing and handling the Savior. That very evening the Resurrection and the Life<sup>2</sup> came to them. While the disciples were gathered together in secret, Jesus appeared in their midst and showed them His hands and His side. This was He who had suffered and died on Calvary's cross; there could be no mistake about it. Now, the disciples had seen personal evidence of the miracle of the Resurrection. The Son of God had done something they thought could never be done.

What effects did the resurrection of the Lord have upon these Easter disciples?

Easter, with all its joy, represented a drastic change for these disciples. Life could never be the same again. It took possession of them. Easter tells the story of what the risen Lord did *to* these men and *through* them.

Initially, the drooping faith of the Easter disciples was revived and renewed. Prior to the Resurrection their faith in Christ rested upon His signs or miracles as evidence of His divine sonship and great power. After the Resurrection their faith rested in the Cross as proof of His divine authority to forgive sin and His power to quicken sinners from spiritual death to spiritual life. If Christ could not have conquered death, then He could not be the Savior and Redeemer of their souls.

The disciples experienced this saving power in the forgiveness of their sins. Broken by Christ's death, their lives were pulled in many directions. They were like sheep without a shepherd, even as the Lord had prophesied on the night of His betrayal.<sup>3</sup> Their many sins toward Him were like heavy weights upon their souls. After the Resurrection, they found a reconciliation with Him and with one another. Simon Peter became a whole person once more when in penitence he gave his Lord all he could summon from his remorseful and defeated life. Thomas, fighting doubt and unbelief within, cried "My Lord and my God!" and

was made whole again. All the disciples, despairing of life for having forsaken Him in His hour of need, found peace with the living Lord. All of them had been regenerated by the same power as that which brought Christ out of the grave. And had poor Judas been there, He too would have known the joy of sin forgiven and new life and power.

These followers of the Lord found a unity of love with the Redeemer. This bond was strengthened by their association with Him during the forty days between His resurrection and His ascension. These were days of blessed fellowship, as Master and disciple were joined together more closely. The disciples grew in grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus.

The great change that had come about in the lives of the Easter disciples was powerfully demonstrated as these few simple men began to preach the gospel of the Resurrection and to build Christ's kingdom in this world for all eternity.

The disciples would have lost their Easter Christ entirely, if they had sought to keep things as once they had been. The life which they enjoyed with Christ in Galilee had been real, it had been like a seedbed in which His movement and teachings took root. It is entirely possible that some of the disciples wished for the old days. One can easily imagine them saying, "Let's go back to Galilee now, and do what we used to do." But Christ's mind wasn't on Galilee any more; it was on the world. Certainly, the Lord must have often become restive under the parochialism and provincialism of the disciples, and their lack of vision and imagination.

With all that had taken place in the past few weeks of their lives, it still took grace for them to be willing to change their plans, ideas, and even basic outlooks in the light of the events to follow—His ascension and Pentecost. But it is to their everlasting credit that they carried out the great commission which Jesus Christ had given them: "Go . . . and make disciples of all nations."<sup>4</sup> By the grace of God they were equal to the task. We read in Acts: "And with great power the apostles gave their



testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.”<sup>5</sup>

Finally, these Easter disciples won the victory over death, hell, and the power of the devil. Christ had proclaimed prior to His decease: “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.”<sup>6</sup> His resurrection was ample proof of this great affirmation. The fear in the hearts of the disciples had been overcome by faith in Him. They believed that Christ lives and reigns to all eternity. Whatever might come—trial, disappointment, sickness, trouble, persecution, and even death—the disciples would not fear. They were men of vision who had their eyes on the Redeemer. They knew that even death was not the end, but only the beginning, the glorious entrance into the heavenly kingdom. This glorious prospect Christ’s resurrection proved beyond a shadow of a doubt.

The Easter disciples are representative of men today who have met the risen Lord and have rejoiced in God their Redeemer. They have the power of the Resurrection in their hearts by faith. They are constrained by the ever-present and all-powerful Lord to share in the witness of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, to build His church for time and for eternity.

Just what is this power of Easter that changes men’s lives? We talk about it so much, but do we know what it really is?

It certainly is not just a seasonal experience which comes and goes every year according to the calendar, a sort of annual high point in the program of the church. Nor is it merely some vague spirit that goes on and on in the world like the lasting influence of good men long after they are gone. Nor is it the force of an idea, a truth, or a principle that leaves its mark on history and contributes to the development of a culture. No! The power of Easter is something much greater and much different, for otherwise you cannot explain what happened when it took hold of the followers of Christ and when they began to demonstrate it to

their world; nor can you explain what has happened since that time and is still happening today.

Easter is *always*, because we worship a *living* Lord! We do not worship a beautiful statue, fixed and static, but we worship One who is alive continuously, like a fountain of water. Jesus Christ is not a memory, but a living presence. Wherever He is, there is activity. This activity is the power of His resurrection. The manifestation of this power tells the story of what the risen Lord does *to* men and *through* them.

Jesus Christ by His resurrection overcame death and has made man a sharer of the righteousness of God. In other words, there is power in the blood of Christ only because there is power in His resurrection. Easter made the cross of Calvary infinitely valuable as the perfect atonement for human sin.

If Christ had not risen from the grave on the third day, there would not be forgiveness of our sins. There would be no point at all to our Christian worship wherein the forgiveness of sin is declared to all who in penitence and faith come to the throne of mercy. In fact, we would not have a Christian worship at all. Unless Christ really conquered death and was raised from the dead, our faith is vain; we are still in our sins.<sup>7</sup>

No, if Christ did not literally rise from the grave, then our churches have been making a big fuss about nothing in this season of Lent, for then the gospel is not the power of God for salvation to all who believe, but rather "foolishness" and "a stumbling block" as it was to the Greeks and Jews in the Apostle Paul's day.<sup>8</sup>

Another element in this mighty power of Easter is that we are also raised up by His power to a new life. Now that doesn't mean some kind of superficial improvement in our lives, but rather a complete transformation. Life is never the same again. The miracle of the resurrection of Jesus produces the miracle of this regeneration of sinners.

That's what Jesus meant when He spoke of being born again by the Spirit. It is the radical renewal of the human heart, which

by nature is dead in trespasses and sins. And it is possible only through the resurrection power of the Son of God. There is no other way to a new life. A spiritually dead sinner must first be raised from his spiritual grave. It requires a new heart to believe in Christ, and that is one of God's great Easter gifts to sinners.

Still another element in this resurrection power of Easter is that of witnessing to the redemptive nature of the gospel. Like the disciples, we are called to follow Him wherever His course may take us. It may be that He will call us personally to go into all the world with the Easter message of life and hope. It may be that our witness is needed right where we are. The power of the Resurrection must be brought into our homes, as well as into our churches. It must pervade the realms of politics, economics, education, and international relations. Christ wants us; He needs us to bear witness of His saving gospel to all mankind. He needs us because we have met Him and our lives have been changed by His resurrection power.

Finally, this great power of Easter is a certain pledge of our blessed resurrection. It is not merely an illustration, but a pledge, a promise, a guarantee. The Apostle Paul says, that "Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep."<sup>9</sup> His believing people are the full harvest.

The resurrection of Christ literally means that hundreds and thousands and millions of people, who have put their whole trust in Him for salvation, will one day be raised from the dead for everlasting glory. That's not too much for us to believe and to anticipate, though we live in a world that is in the grip of death and decay. All around us we see signs of what sin has done to us and to our world. But we are not afraid, for if we have the power of Easter in our hearts we are victors over death.

We are going to die some day. In fact, we are dying every day, little by little. Worse than that, we are already dead by nature—spiritually dead. However, we can begin to live right in the midst of all this death, and we can live forever in glory when at last we die, if Christ is our Redeemer; for He died and

rose again to give us real resurrection power over all death, in body and soul, for time and for eternity.

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"What shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" This question of Pontius Pilate is once again directed to every man of every age.

What have we done with Jesus? How have we handled His case for our souls?

God grant that none of us may have crucified the Lord afresh by our shameful treatment of Him. God grant that none of us may be guilty of the sins of the men and women whose cases have been examined during these days of Lent.

Rather, may we like the disciples of Easter believe in the living Lord and be transformed by the power of His resurrection to walk in newness of life, ever pleasing to our Redeemer!

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. John 2:19-22 and Matthew 16:21

<sup>2</sup> John 11:25

<sup>3</sup> Mark 14:27

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 28:18

<sup>5</sup> Acts 4:33

<sup>6</sup> John 11:25, 26

<sup>7</sup> 1 Cor. 15:12-19

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Romans 1:16, 1 Cor. 1:23, and 1 Cor. 2:2

<sup>9</sup> 1 Cor. 15:20